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Case study: Norway's Skills Policy Council and Future Skills Needs Committee

This chapter discusses Norway's recent efforts in strengthening the governance of its skills system as part of its Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021. The focus lies on two new governance arrangements that have been introduced as part of this strategy, the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee. For the first time, the Skills Policy Council introduced an overarching co-ordination body for the previously fragmented field of skills policy, applying a whole-of-government approach. The council includes not only traditional tripartite partners, but also actors from the third sector. The Future Skills Needs Committee improved information systems by providing political decision-makers with a common data basis and coherent definition of challenges in skills policy that is anchored both in scientific data analysis as well as social partner expertise.

Introduction

Norway is generally regarded as one of the leading countries in terms of how it develops and uses the skills of its people, with most indicators of skills development and use showing above average results for Norway compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 2018^[1]; OECD, 2019^[2]). Enrolment in pre-primary education is near universal, the scores of Norwegian students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) are above the OECD average, as is the share of young tertiary graduates, and participation in adult learning is strong. However, similar to other industrialised economies, structural changes put the Norwegian skills system under stress. Rapidly changing technologies and the digitisation of society, increasingly internationalised markets, and a changing workforce due to migration and demographic change create challenges for Norway's skills system, giving rise to new skill demands (Ministry of Education, 2017^[3]). In 2014, the *OECD Skills Strategy Diagnostic Report: Norway* highlighted some of the weak points in the Norwegian skills system, and specific challenges that are likely to arise for Norway in the coming years (OECD, 2014^[4]). Areas for possible improvements were highlighted in the four categories covered in the report: skills development, the effective use of skills, an active supply of skills and the governance arrangements of Norway's skills system. Governance arrangements have been identified as an “enabling” condition for successfully implementing improvements in the other three areas and will be at the core of this case study.

In order to respond effectively to the identified challenges, and to improve the governance arrangements of Norway's skills system, the Norwegian government, represented by several ministries together with social partners, the voluntary sector and adult learning associations, as well as representatives of the Sami ethnic minority, have committed themselves to implementing the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 (Nasjonal Kompetansepolitisk Strategi) (Ministry of Education, 2017^[3]). This strategy prioritises certain issues and policy fields for future skills policy and includes the implementation of two new governance arrangements.

These new governance arrangements, the Skills Policy Council (Kompetansepolitisk råd) and the Future Skills Needs Committee (Kompetansebehovsutvalget), are analysed in greater detail in this case study. This case study is based on document research and semi-structured interviews conducted in April 2019 in Oslo with several representatives from stakeholders such as the respective ministries, public agencies, social partners, learning providers and subnational authorities. It assesses how and to what extent the rearrangement of governance structures contributes to achieving a “whole-of-government approach” to skills policy. While all four dimensions of this approach will be touched on during this case study, the focus is on:

- Promoting co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration across the whole of government.
- Engaging stakeholders throughout the policy cycle.
- Building integrated information systems.

In general, while both the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee are still relatively new institutions, they already show high potential. Furthermore, they could also act as blueprints for a range of other countries with similar skill regimes. However, this report also shows that certain problems must be tackled in order to further develop the role of these two new institutions and allow them to live up to their full potential.

Norway's education and training system

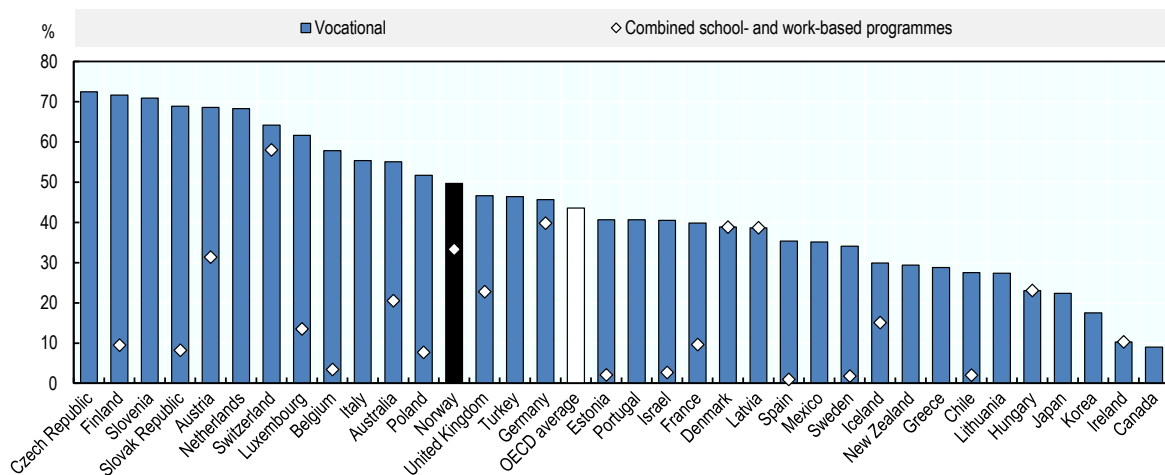
As mentioned, Norway's skills system is regarded as one of the leading systems among OECD countries, and most indicators show above average results compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 2018^[1]). Enrolment in early childhood education is 97% for 3-5 year-olds, and therefore nearly universal. The enrolment rate for 3 year-olds is 20% higher than the OECD average (OECD, 2018^[1]). Concerning

students' performance in PISA, Norway again ranks above the OECD average by one point in science, 12 points in mathematics and 12 points in reading (OECD, 2019^[5]). The share of 25-34 year-olds who have completed tertiary education is more than 48%, compared to an average of 44.5% across OECD countries (OECD, 2020^[6]). Norway ranks among the top third of OECD countries regarding coverage in job-related adult learning (participation by individuals and provision by employers), as well as adult learning inclusiveness, flexibility and alignment (OECD, 2019^[7]). Norway is also a leader among OECD countries in terms of educational expenses for primary, secondary and post-secondary (non-tertiary) education, with a focus on research and development, and spending on tertiary education is above the OECD average (OECD, 2018^[1]).

In the academic literature on skills regimes, the Norwegian case is often described as a hybrid between a “statist” and a “collective” skills regime (Michelsen, Olsen and Høst, 2014^[8]; Nyen and Tønder, 2016^[9]). In statist systems, the state engages heavily in the provision of vocational education and training (VET) via (full-time) public vocational schools. In collective systems, both employers and the state are collectively responsible for providing VET via apprenticeships at firms and (part-time) vocational schools (Busemeyer and Trampusch, 2012^[10]). Norway shows characteristics of both of these systems, with possibilities for individuals to either get vocational qualifications through full-time schools or via dual VET in a system that resembles the apprenticeship model. Similar to other policy areas in Norway, such as labour market policy and wage bargaining, VET is traditionally jointly governed by the state and social partners (i.e. employers' associations and trade unions). As became clear in interviews conducted in this project, the governance reforms at the centre of this case study cannot be understood without keeping in mind the historical legacies of strong social partner co-operation, which can be seen a possible blueprint for the role of the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee, or as competition.

Common to both statist and collective skills regimes is that in contrast to “liberal” skills systems (for example the United States), VET has an important role in Norway compared to general and academic education, and is in general of high quality and social status. This is visible in the high share of upper secondary students enrolled in VET rather than general education, which is significantly above the OECD average, as can be seen in Figure 5.1. In total, around 16% of upper secondary students are enrolled in combined school- and work-based programmes, i.e. training models that resemble the apprenticeship principle.

Figure 5.1. Share of all upper secondary students in vocational programmes and combined school- and work-based programmes (2015)



Source: OECD (2020^[11]), *Enrolment by type of institution*, https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=EDU_ENRL_INST.

StatLink  <https://doi.org/10.1787/888934112747>

Apprenticeship models of dual VET have existed in Norway since the first half of the 20th century. The state increasingly took responsibility for VET in the post-war period through the expansion of a school-based training system, although VET remained jointly governed by social partners. In 1994, the dominance of school-based training ended with the introduction of “Reform 94”, which was decisive in the development of Norway’s skills system towards a hybrid model that combines statist and collective elements (Nyen and Tønder, 2016^[9]). The reform fundamentally restructured Norwegian secondary level education by implementing the right for at least three years of secondary education, severely reducing the number of basic courses¹ of study, improving the ability to move from vocational education to other tracks of the educational system and tertiary education, and most importantly introducing the “2+2 model” for VET, which ultimately led to a resurgence of apprenticeships cf. (Bowman, 2005^[12]).

Consequently, the Norwegian upper secondary level education system consists of a unitary school system that offers vocational programmes and general academic programmes within the same schools (Nyen and Tønder, 2016^[9]), as well as granting opportunities to combine or switch between the different tracks. Students first choose between different broad vocational and general programmes and select specialisations, and then focus on a number of specific trades later on (Michelsen, Olsen and Høst, 2014^[8]). Norway’s corporatist system of decision making gives tripartite bodies, and therefore social partners, at the national and regional level important advisory and informal decision-making functions in defining the content and structure of VET courses (Nyen and Tønder, 2016^[9]).

The hybrid nature of Norway’s skills system is also highlighted in the provision of vocational programmes, which can be completed either fully in vocational schools or as part of a firm-based apprenticeship. The “2+2 model” specifies that the first two years of upper secondary education are provided in full-time schools. Students who find a willing firm can then complete a full-time apprenticeship for the subsequent two to three years. Those who do not want to or who are unable to find an apprenticeship place in a firm have the right to complete the programme via a third year in school before taking the final examination.

Over time, and in particular since the “Competence Reforms” (Kompetansereformen) of the late 1990s and early 2000s, continuing and further training, as well as lifelong learning, have become increasingly important in Norway’s skills system. The issue was also one of labour’s central demands in collective bargaining at that time, especially concerning the financing of further education (Bowman, 2005^[12]). Ultimately, the reforms stated that all adults have the statutory right to a primary, lower and upper secondary education,² and the right to study leave. Financial assistance and tax incentives were increased, thereby creating a market for continuing education and training. Furthermore, the Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning was established (VOX, now called Skills Norway/Kompetanse Norge) (Bowman, 2005^[12]). However, no compromise was found concerning the co-financing of further education by employers, unions and the state through a fund. Bowman relates this failure to the lack of an institutional framework of tripartite decision-making bodies within the relatively new realm of continuing training. Consequently, stakeholders were unable to determine which specific training programmes should or should not be supported by the fund.

More recently, structural changes such as rapidly changing technologies, increasingly internationalised markets and a changing workforce due to migration and demographic change have increasingly challenged the Norwegian skills system. The OECD’s 2014 Skills Strategy report for Norway highlighted several challenges connected to skills development, skills supply, skills use and the governance of skills (OECD, 2014^[4]). For skills development, these challenges included the still comparatively low, but increasing, share of low performers among students, a relatively large share of adults with poor basic skills, falling educational attainment at the upper secondary level, and the lack of career centres in certain counties. Concerning skills supply, the low labour market attachment of people with disabilities and the unused labour market potential of older Norwegians were identified, as well as a lack of focus on helping low-skilled youth. For skills use, a large gap in literacy proficiency between low-skilled and high-skilled occupations, the low access of individuals in low-skilled occupations to employer funded (further) training, a low share of self-employed individuals and business startups, and the large unused

potential of overqualified migrants were identified. The report also highlighted that challenges in skills development, supply and use varied substantially at a regional level due to Norway's geography, which is shaped by "long distances, low population density, and small local labour markets with limited possibilities for commuting". Regional variance includes, for example, substantially lower on-time completion of upper secondary school in Finnmark County (55%) than in Sogn og Fjordane County (80%).

The OECD highlighted three key challenges to be addressed regarding the governance of Norway's skills system:

- Limited vertical co-ordination between national, county and municipal levels, and a lack of information on skills for local stakeholders.
- Limited horizontal co-ordination between different ministries (which resemble "silos") to work jointly on common goals.
- Limited co-ordination between (public and private) stakeholders.

The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 tries to tackle these challenges directly. The new government arrangements implemented as part of this strategy can be seen as "enabling conditions" for the design of adequate policies. These are introduced and discussed in the following section.

The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021: The Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee

Overview of the strategy

The Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 commits the strategy partners to "ensure that individuals and businesses have the skills that give Norway a competitive business sector, an efficient and sound public sector, and an inclusive labour market" (Ministry of Education, 2017^[3]). The strategy partners include:

- Public institutions: The Norwegian government represented by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Local Government and Modernisation, the Ministry of Education and Research,³ and the Sami Parliament representing the Sami indigenous people in Norway.
- Social partners: Employers represented by the Employers' Association Spekter, the Norwegian Association of Local and Regional Authorities, the Confederation of Norwegian Enterprises (NHO), and the Enterprise Federation of Norway (Virke). Employees are represented by the Federation of Norwegian Professional Associations (Akademikerne), the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO), the Confederation of Unions for Professionals (Unio) and the Confederation of Vocational Unions (YS).
- Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the field of non-profit adult learning provision are represented by the Norwegian Association for Adult Learning (VOFO).

These strategy partners have agreed on three main objectives:

1. "Contribute to making informed choices for the individual and for society": This mainly includes the creation and improved provision of sufficient information (regionally and nationally) for individuals, educational institutions, and the private and public sector in general, including skills forecasting and career guidance.
2. "Promote learning in the workplace and effective use of skills": This includes the promotion of dual VET, increasing co-ordination between higher education and the labour market, reskilling (especially towards digital skills), and an improved certification of skills acquired in the workplace (and/or abroad).

3. “Enhance skills among adults with weak labour market attachment”: This mainly includes increased collaboration between firms, NGOs and private training providers in order to implement adult education measures for specific target groups, such as individuals with poor basic skills, low formal qualifications or those who lack Norwegian skills (i.e. immigrants), or the Sami population.

Two new governance arrangements have been introduced as part of this strategy: the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee. These governance arrangements aim to facilitate the design and introduction of future substantive policy reforms within the framework of the strategy.

Role of involved stakeholders

The Ministry of Education and Research, and specifically the Department of Skills Policy, fulfils a lead function in co-ordinating skills policy as a whole. It was also mainly responsible for the introduction of the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education is responsible for the education system ranging from kindergarten, primary and secondary education to vocational and higher education. Within the Ministry of Education and Research, the Department of Integration is involved in skills policies targeting migrants.

Three further ministries are involved in the broader area of skills policies. The Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is mostly concerned with active labour market policies, as well as formal education and labour market measures in general. The Ministry of Trade is mostly responsible for ensuring that skills policies are in accordance with the needs of the Norwegian economy. The Ministry of Local Government's involvement concerns an ongoing restructuring of Norway's administrative divisions (counties, *Fylke*, currently 19), which involves a reduction in the number of counties and giving regional governments more responsibilities in industrial development and skills policy. For example, counties are involved in the development of regional skills strategies and the evaluation of specific regional skills needs. However, counties are also represented in the Skills Policy Council by one representative of the county council (*Fylkesting*). This representative's role is to report back to all the heads of the county administrations (chief executives).

Skills Norway (Kompetanse Norge), a directorate under the Ministry of Education and Research, is also central to the skills strategy. Previously known as VOX (Norwegian Agency for Lifelong Learning), Skills Norway's main policy goal is to promote lifelong learning, with a particular focus on vulnerable groups such as adults with low skills and education or immigrants. However, its tasks encompass a far wider range of issues, having acted as a main driving force behind the skills strategy in general. Skills Norway acts as the secretariat (with five members) for the Future Skills Needs Committee and a number of additional expert committees. It also funds research in the area of skills more broadly. Most importantly, while decision-making powers reside within the Ministry of Education and Research, Skills Norway advises on future skills policy development in general and is responsible for specific policy implementation. Thereby, it co-ordinates between the main stakeholders of the strategy, including social partners, educational providers and ministries.

Concerning social partners, a wide range of peak-level⁴ employer and employee organisations are involved to represent the interests of their members. This includes the NHO and the LO, which were historically often the main social partners driving skills policy in Norway – cf. (Bowman, 2005_[12]). As in many other countries with strong social partner organisations, they often supply certain “goods” to their members who are also in the field of skills policy, such as specific further training measures or an educational fund that grants scholarships. Correspondingly, their involvement in the Skills Policy Council aims to better co-ordinate social partners' policy measures with public policy measures.

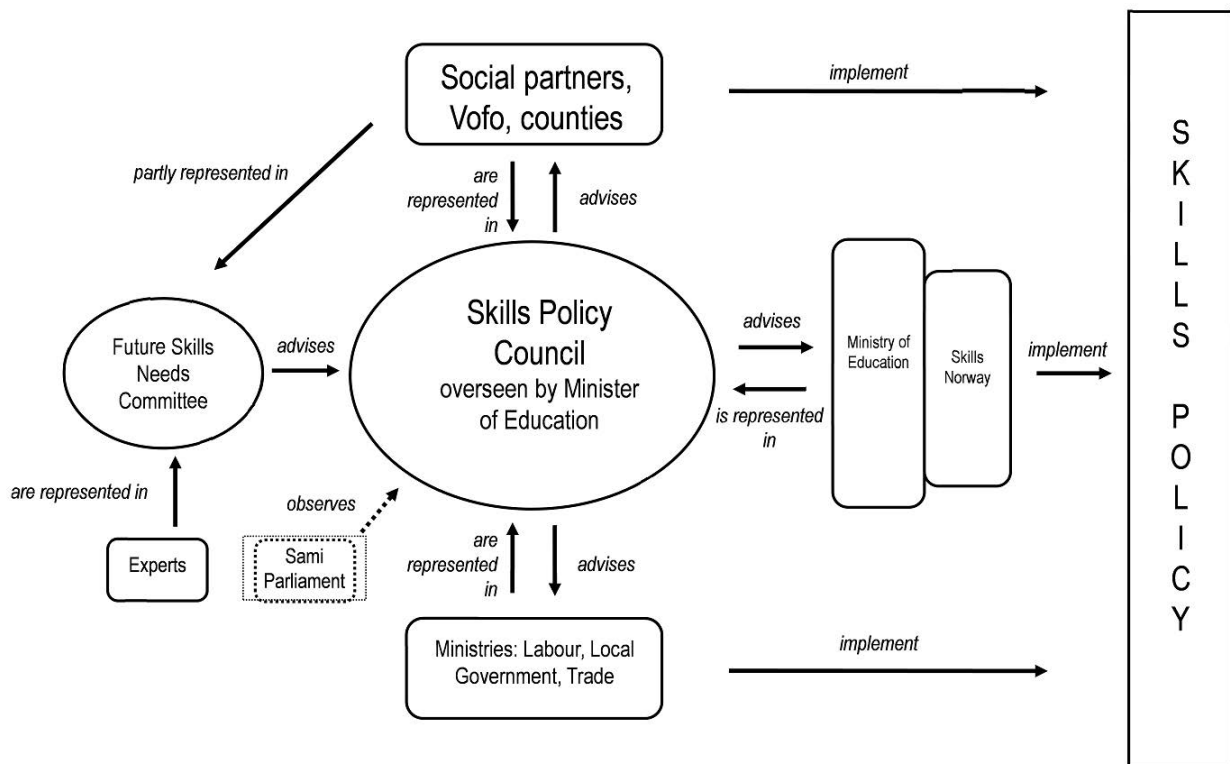
The Norwegian Association for Adult Learning (VOFO) is an umbrella association that represents exclusively non-profit providers of voluntary formal and informal education and training programmes in the field of adult learning. Such providers range from organisations with connections to political movements

such as social-democracy and Christian-democracy, associations representing certain professions (farmers, medical doctors) to religious groups. Programmes are provided in a variety of subjects including basic skills, retraining measures, social skills and cultural education, as well as programmes suited to the needs of certain types of companies.

The Sami Parliament represents the interests of the Sami indigenous people in Norway and is involved in the development of educational programmes involving subjects such as Sami language in primary and secondary education, as well as apprenticeship schemes such as reindeer husbandry.

The relationship between these stakeholders, the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee is depicted in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2. Governance arrangements in Norway's skills system



The Skills Policy Council is at the core of the new governance arrangements of the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021. According to its mandate (Norwegian Government Security and Service Organisation, 2019^[13]), the council's purpose is to "follow-up" on the strategy and to continue to promote co-operation between the involved stakeholders, which should include regular discussions and advice on current skills policy issues, regular reports on the strategy partners' own policy measures to implement the strategy, as well as a potential revision of the strategy if needed. The council has been established only for the period of the current strategy. It is supposed to base its discussions and recommendations on the conclusions of the Future Skills Needs Committee.

In practice, the council acts as a purely advisory body to all stakeholders, with the goal of co-ordinating and improving existing and new policy measures in the field of (public and non-public/social-partner provided) skills policy. The minister of education chairs the council, thereby providing the opportunity for all stakeholders to influence policy making at a very high level. Most importantly, in contrast to other tripartite councils in Norway, the Skill Policy Council does not have a decision or policy-making function, and only gives non-binding advice. This has certain drawbacks, as explored in the analysis section.

All strategy partners⁵ plus one representative of the counties have a seat at the Skills Policy Council, as shown in Figure 5.2. The council meets roughly three to four times a year for about two hours. The agenda of the meetings is usually set by the Ministry of Education and Research. Reports from the Future Skills Needs Committee are also presented in the council, with possibilities for members to make comments. Council members present their statements on the agenda topics. Current topics of the Skills Policy Council include a recent regional reform (see above), new findings of the Future Skills Needs Committee (see below), as well as discussions on the future role of the Skills Policy Council itself.

The Future Skills Needs Committee (Kompetansebehovsutvalget)

The mandate of the Future Skills Needs Committee is to “provide the best possible evidence-based assessment of Norway’s future skills needs, as a basis for national and regional planning, and for strategic decision making of both employers and individuals”. This concerns short-, medium- and long-term skills needs (Dalbak, 2018_[14]). More specifically, its tasks are to “generate and organise the evidence base” on Norway’s future skills needs based on already available data, as well as to “stimulate the development of new evidence”. For this purpose, the Future Skills Needs Committee can fund its own research via its own budget financed by the Ministry of Education and Research, which was generally perceived as well-resourced by interviewees.

The committee is expected to co-ordinate and improve existing data creation and utilisation among all involved stakeholders and use a variety of qualitative and quantitative data sources. It is also expected to produce an annual report based on these analyses and assessments, including, for example, current challenges in skills policy and specific regional or sectoral focus points. The committee is appointed for a period of three years, after which its mandate can be extended and adapted and committee members can be changed. The committee meets for around five all-day meetings a year.

Members of the Future Skills Needs Committee are representatives from social partners, the involved ministries, and experts. However, VOFO, the county representative and the Sami parliament are not involved. Participating experts include analysts and researchers from, for example, universities, the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) and Statistics Norway. In terms of academic disciplines, there is a clear focus on economists, especially among members affiliated to universities.

The secretariat, which is located at Skills Norway and headed by an economist, plays a central role in the Future Skills Needs Committee and oversees the committee’s compliance with its mandate. Within the committee, decisions on the content of the reports have so far been made unanimously by all members. Members can collectively and individually give input concerning the agenda of the committee. In the early days of the committee, the secretariat had the most power in agenda-setting and thereby also determined the content (of meetings and consequently reports) to a significant extent before specific decisions by the members were made. As will be outlined later in this case study, measures to resolve such frictions are currently being implemented.

Analysis

This section analyses the functioning of the Skills Policy Council and the Future Skills Needs Committee. It highlights certain characteristics as “best-practice” examples, and identifies possible drawbacks and challenges in both arrangements.

Opportunities and challenges of the Skills Policy Council

Opportunities

In general, all involved stakeholders interviewed for this case study viewed the Skills Policy Council as an improvement to Norway's governance structure within skills policy. They perceived it as a (relatively) successful extension of the existing "Norwegian model" of corporatism and social partnership to the whole field of skills policy, both in terms of an extension across different sub-fields of skills policy and in terms of the actors involved.

The design of the Skills Policy Council builds on similar governance arrangements present in other (sub-) fields as part of the traditional system of tripartite negotiations. These include the tripartite National Council for Vocational Education and Training (Samarbeidsrådet for yrkesopplæring), individual vocational training councils (*Faglig råd*) responsible for individual vocational programmes, county vocational training boards (*Yrkesopplæringsnemnder*), as well as governance arrangements in other policy fields such as labour market policy and wage bargaining. These councils only cover one sub-area of skills policy (for example VET), but often have decision-making functions. This tradition of social partnership acts as an important blueprint for the Skills Policy Council and co-operation between stakeholders, which did not have to be built from scratch as many of the involved stakeholders were already co-operating with each other through existing tripartite bodies.

The Skills Policy Council oversees and applies a holistic approach to a previously very fragmented policy area. While some issue areas such as VET were already covered by previously existing councils, the Skills Policy Council was seen as an improvement by interviewees as it now covers the whole field of skills policy. The other councils only look at skills policy in their own sub-area (for example VET), but do not co-ordinate policy across these different fields.

The Skills Policy Council can therefore identify overarching challenges and consequently help to develop more comprehensive policy solutions instead of addressing only specific parts of the system. Some interviewees also mentioned the benefits of having direct access to high-level government officials, for example the minister of education, which could increase the impact of their recommendations on public policy. Information concerning ongoing political processes is distributed via the council, which opens up the possibility for council members to comment on these issues. Overall, many interviewees (but not all, see further below) believed that they can influence policy making through the Skills Policy Council. At the same time, many stakeholders also perceived the comments of their colleagues within the Skills Policy Council as beneficial to their own work.

Strengthened co-ordination and co-operation is also seen as a main benefit of the Skills Policy Council by interviewed stakeholders. First, it has the potential to improve the quality of policies by strengthening co-ordination between the different measures of stakeholders. Second, it acts as a forum for diffusing expertise within the area of skills policy. Even though there had certainly been co-operation with social partners before the establishment of the Skills Policy Council, it was more infrequent, ad hoc and focused on specific issues, rather than systemic and focused on overarching issues.

Members of the council who are not traditionally part of social partner negotiations (e.g. VOFO, regional representatives) in Norway particularly highlighted the importance of the Skills Policy Council in facilitating co-operation and influencing and developing policies. The council gives these members legitimacy as an important co-operation partner within skills policy, which supports them in reaching out to other stakeholders beyond the formal framework of the council. Thereby, it has served to broaden the engagement of stakeholders. In the words of an interview partner, Norway "cannot afford to miss important contributors to the education system, and that's what we are doing within the council".

Another important contribution of the Skills Policy Council to Norway's governance structure identified by interviewees is its effect on prioritising skills policy among stakeholders. As many interviewees argued, the

Skills Policy Council helps to put skills policy at the top of the agenda of all involved stakeholders, thereby facilitating reforms in this area. Similarly, the Skills Policy Council and the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy in general are seen as giving the government legitimacy and capacity to introduce more ambitious and innovative policies.

This effect was not only highlighted by social partners, but also by ministries concerning horizontal co-operation within government. As one interview partner emphasised, the Skills Policy Council “forces ministries out of their silos” to a certain extent and helps to set common goals. It was also highlighted that especially in the long term, building the infrastructure beneficial for co-operation (i.e. the council) may pay off substantially. However, many interviewees also stressed that there are still many issues that have to be improved within the field of horizontal co-operation, as will be shown in the next section.

The positive effect of prioritising skills policy among stakeholders also applies to vertical co-operation between the different levels of government, i.e. the national and county levels. The inclusion of a county representative (one joint representative of all counties) within the Skills Policy Council helps to put skills on the agenda of individual county executives, who often regard other policy areas such as infrastructure as their main priority. Regular meetings between the county representative and the individual county executives facilitate this effect. The high number of counties represented by the single county representative within the council is not seen as a problem regarding possible conflicts of interests between counties.⁶ This is connected to the abovementioned fact that in practice, the county representative’s role is to put skills on the agenda of the county executives, rather than reconcile diverging interests.

Vertical co-operation is expected to improve further with the new regional reform (“a real change maker” as one interview partner said), in which the Skills Policy Council was also involved. This reform reduces the number of counties from 19 to 11 and gives the regions more responsibilities in the field of skills policy, thereby possibly leading to a trickling down of the topic of skills to the agenda of local governments. As part of this process, every county is “strongly recommended” to create their own regional skills strategy. The regional reform and the Skills Policy Council have thus triggered governance innovations at the subnational level, including regional skills councils and more targeted skills networks. These innovations were perceived to be beneficial by all interviewees as they can also tackle more specific, hands-on topics.

Interviewees agreed that it is difficult to isolate the effect of the Skills Policy Council on specific policies implemented. In other words, it is hard to say to what extent a specific policy would exist without the new governance arrangements of the Skills Policy Council. As one interview partner admitted, many measures reported by stakeholders within the council might have occurred without the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy and its new governance arrangements, but they would have been less co-ordinated with the other strategy partners. Interviewees explicitly mentioned two new policies that they regarded as heavily influenced by the recommendations of the Skills Policy Council:

- **Sector/industry programmes for training:** This policy involves sector/industry-specific co-operation between government and social partners to design specific further training opportunities for workers affected by digitisation and other factors changing skill demands. Two programmes are currently being designed in the fields of “local care services” and “construction and industry”. Social partners and the government are contributing to programme development and the training provision and recruitment of trainees, while employers have agreed to send employees to training during their paid working time. According to interviewees, the specific idea behind these programmes was recommended directly by stakeholders within the Skills Policy Council.
- **Short, flexible courses for advanced digital skills:** These further training courses that cover topics such as cyber security, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things (IoT) are designed in co-operation with businesses and universities. They were implemented as a direct reaction to the skills needs expressed by employer associations within the Skills Policy Council.

Challenges

While all interview partners agreed that the Skills Policy Council is an improvement to Norway's governance structure in skills policy, most also mentioned fundamental challenges that have to be tackled so that the council can live up to its full potential. While interviewed stakeholders sometimes differed in terms of the direction of the council's further development, the challenges cited were remarkably similar.

Most frequently, interviewees argued in favour of a more flexible mode of operation within the meetings that could improve the quality of dialogue. Currently, meetings last for only two hours and are organised so that each stakeholder can comment in turn on the current agenda. This means that members do not have the possibility and time to discuss issues or co-ordinate between council members during the meetings. There are also downsides to the fact that meetings are held and led by high-level political officials, with many interviewees noting that this leads to a prioritisation of politics rather than promoting in-depth debates on specific policies. This can lead to very abstract meetings with “a lot of talking but very little action”. As no interactive discussion is possible within the council, there is also no way to negotiate, compromise and reach consensus among the stakeholders; only voicing an opinion is possible. However, measures are currently being implemented to tackle these shortcomings, as mentioned later in this chapter, including providing more time for discussions in the council and reducing the number of agenda items.

The agenda is largely set by the government and the Ministry of Education and Research instead of being decided jointly within the council, although traditional social partners have strong ties with the ministries already due to older tripartite agreements and can use these channels to informally exert influence on the council's agenda. As an interview partner argued, “they will come to us, they are only a phone call away”. As well as agenda-setting being dominated by the ministry, there may also be a lack of responsiveness and proactivity on the part of council members. Mechanisms for agenda-setting could thus be improved to ensure sufficient possibilities for stakeholders to influence the agenda, as well as to ensure their commitment.

The challenges mentioned so far are especially detrimental for “new” co-operation partners not represented in traditional tripartite bargaining as they often do not have access to the communication channels established between the traditional tripartite bargaining partners of the Norwegian model of social partnership. This applies to informal connections to the ministries and government, as well as other social partners. Ultimately, these stakeholders lack the informal power of employer associations and labour unions to influence the agenda of council meetings. It is also much harder for them to co-ordinate policy measures with other stakeholders outside meetings of the Skills Policy Council.

Another main issue for the Skills Policy Council is its still unclear role and vague mandate concerning its advisory functions. This is especially problematic concerning its relation to other, older tripartite bodies that have partly overlapping responsibilities, i.e. the Council on Labour Market Issues, the National Council for VET and many other committees involved in education and training policy. No clear rules seem to exist that determine if the Skills Policy Council can actually give recommendations on a certain issue or if they should be subject to other tripartite bodies. This compromises the role of the Skills Policy Council as an overarching body and makes the field of skills policy rather fragmented again.

Similarly, the council's role in policy development is unclear for many strategy partners, which is also an issue of accountability. The Ministry of Education and Research compiles a yearly report of all policy measures implemented by the strategy partners (social partners, ministries, other stakeholders) as part of the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy. However, no mechanism exists beyond these yearly reports where strategy partners can assess if the government actually follows up on their specific advice, and vice versa (i.e. if social partners follow up on government advice). Partners do not know what happens with their feedback and cannot see an “end product”. The role and responsibilities of the different organisations present in the council also do not seem to be clear to all stakeholders.

All stakeholders interviewed agreed that horizontal co-operation between the different ministries could be improved. It was argued that some ministries only superficially contribute to the strategy without really internalising overarching goals or offering resources for joint projects. Each ministry remains first and foremost dedicated to its own goals, for which it is responsible to parliament. Different priorities are present in the different ministries, for example employment-oriented priorities with large short-term impacts on the unemployed versus long-term priorities concerning economic development or skills needs without immediate payoffs. Agenda-setting was also an issue of horizontal co-operation. Involved ministries, similar to other involved stakeholders, raised concerns that the Ministry of Education and Research primarily sets the agenda within the Skills Policy Council. But again, the underlying issue might not only be the strong agenda-setting power of the Ministry, but also the lack of commitment of other ministries to such issues.

Opportunities and challenges of the Future Skills Needs Committee

Opportunities

Similar to the Skills Policy Council, all interviewed stakeholders agreed that the Future Skills Needs Committee is an improvement to Norway's governance arrangements in the field of skills policy. In addition to being involved in policy making and implementation through the Skills Policy Council, stakeholders are now also engaged in collecting data and creating a common basis for discussion, and can thus jointly identify important issues and challenges ahead. The committee has facilitated the convergence of social partners, government and researchers towards a common, coherent definition and perception of current problems in skills policy. This has been described as essential considering the wide diversity of data and analyses produced by individual organisations and stakeholders in this field, which previously made it hard to look at the policy field in a more holistic way. It was generally perceived as an asset that the committee is relatively protected from direct influence from the political level, and therefore acts as an independent advisory body.

The committee's focus on generating a common foundation of data and evidence helps stakeholders agree on the facts and have a more fruitful dialogue. All interviewees agreed that the joint process of problem definition by stakeholders helps to facilitate and speed-up the work of the Skills Policy Council, as well as the whole policy- and decision-making process of other stakeholders, including ministries and social partners. Research on the process of agenda-setting in public policy research (Kingdon, 2011^[15]) shows that problem definition is already an inherently political process. Therefore, involving all relevant stakeholders in the early phases of the policy process can avoid later reform deadlocks. As one interview partner argued, stakeholders now "have a common fundament - that we agree on the statistics. That we do not have to fight about the statistics. That raises the level of the discussions". This holds for social partners, new stakeholders and government ministries (improving horizontal co-operation within government), as all have confirmed to use the committee's reports in their activities. Similarly, the fact that all stakeholders agree on a common problem definition and identify common challenges creates a certain sense of urgency and highlights the importance of skills policy as a policy field in general, thereby potentially putting it to the top of the agenda of all decision makers.

In terms of vertical co-operation between the involved stakeholders, the committee's reports are perceived to have had an increasing impact more recently. In its second report, the committee focused on the regional development of future skills needs, which was seen as especially beneficial by several interviewees as local stakeholders often do not have the resources to effectively use existing data in their decision-making processes. The committee identified future regional challenges in the field of skills policy by combining existing datasets from different data sources and aggregation levels, thereby addressing certain challenges such as demographic change and helping regions to use the new data on skills needs more strategically. The latest report of the committee applied a similar approach to economic sectors and industries. Certain specialised subcommittees have been established within the committee to tackle

subtopics (i.e. higher education or work-based learning), which is generally regarded as very promising by committee members. The committee has also identified gaps in the data, for instance regarding regional or sectoral data, in order to put its available research resources to productive use.

In general, all interviewed stakeholders claimed that they can influence the content of the reports, for example by jointly deciding on which data are adequate and reliable. Most importantly, even ideologically opposed social partners seem to be able and willing to compromise about which data to include in the reports. However, as will be visible in the next section, problems connected to agenda-setting and the consequent pre-selection of topics are an issue within the Future Skills Needs Committee.

Challenges

As with the Skills Policy Council, the Future Skills Needs Committee still struggles to identify a clear mandate and an adequate mode of operation. These issues are connected to visible tensions between members of the secretariat and researchers with social partners. Nearly all interviewees admitted certain “communication problems” between these two groups, and the role of the social partners in the committee does not seem to be interpreted by all members in the same way.

Although committee members can decide on the data they acknowledge as adequate and reliable for the report, they cannot influence the wider range of topics considered as fitting for the report. In other words, the agenda of the meetings, and as a result also partly the content of the report, seems to be mostly determined by the secretariat itself, which causes frustration for many committee members. This is particularly problematic as committee members with the most practical experience “on-the-ground”, and who are therefore most aware of new socio-economic changes concerning skills, namely the social partners, have problems in putting possible future challenges on the agenda. Many interviewees acknowledged that they expect the situation to improve with new restructuring measures, such as the establishment of subcommittees and workshops. However, these issues also seem to be more fundamentally connected to a focus and preference of the secretariat for more quantitative evidence rather than the more qualitative or anecdotal evidence that social partners can contribute.

The mandate of the committee also seems to be interpreted differently by the secretariat and academics in relation to social partners. The secretariat views the purpose of the committee as gathering and publishing “objective” and purely data-based reports without normative/prescriptive elements, as well as distributing such evidence and funding further research projects. However, the social partners adopt a more holistic perspective, for example arguing that it is not possible to just present “facts” as data always require interpretation, which can never be purely objective and apolitical. As emphasised by interviewees, the choice concerning the type of evidence accepted by the secretariat (quantitative versus qualitative) is not necessarily objective in the first place. As a consequence of these limits, the reports’ conclusions are often considered as relatively weak and as “stating the obvious” by many interviewees. The added value of the reports (in terms of content, not necessarily political impact) was often considered as limited by many interviewees, one arguing for example “I could look that up on statistics Norway anytime, so what is new?”

The secretariat seems to have found a compromise position in this regard by agreeing that the committee should highlight commonly identified future “challenges” in the report while not crossing the threshold towards giving policy advice and recommendations. Through specifically highlighting future challenges considered as the most pressing, the secretariat allows for an interpretation of the data – a decision in general welcomed and approved by all stakeholders interviewed. Thereby, the Future Skills Needs Committee raises the level of discussion by providing a common problem definition (i.e. the challenges), while the Skills Policy Council gives political recommendations based on this problem definition. Interviewees agreed that the reports improved year by year, thereby possibly confirming the success of this new compromise.

However, issues concerning the added value of the reports are also partly connected to the committee’s policy field, namely forecasting the future skills needs of Norway. Similar to the Skills Policy Council,

the concept of the Future Skills Needs Committee has its roots in the Norwegian model of corporatism. The committee is loosely based on the Norwegian Technical Calculation Committee for Wage Settlements (TBU), which provides advice on wage increases based on a variety of available data sources. However, in contrast to the TBU, which bases its decisions on historical data, the Future Skills Needs Committee faces certain challenges unique to the field of skills policy. As many interviewees argued, this involves much more uncertainty than making decisions based on historical data in the TBU, and implies that it is difficult to compare the success and performance of the Future Skills Needs Committee to other similar bodies in the Norwegian model of corporatism. In other words, in contrast to the Skills Policy Council, a detailed blueprint is not available for the committee, therefore it is not surprising that it is taking more time for it to find its specific role and mandate.

Interviewees also noted that there is no clear consensus on how to use the funds available to the committee. While the secretariat and researchers want to use the resources for additional research projects, social partners are more in favour of improving the internal processes of the committee. Similar to problems of the Skills Policy Council, social partners want to spend the resources on more and longer meetings and discussions within the committee, thereby improving and fostering its mode of operation and still disputed mandate.

Committee reports so far have clearly focused on facilitating national and regional planning and employers' decision-making processes, while its focus on individuals is still underdeveloped. The clear target group of the committee reports are policy makers rather than individuals seeking advice on acquiring skills (students, unemployed, etc.), and there have been no measures taken to reformulate the reports into a format more comprehensible for young people or their parents. However, many interviewees acknowledged that they were sceptical concerning such a use of the reports, and mentioned limited benefits due to the very general (and system-level) nature of the reports. Furthermore, they highlighted the possible disadvantages of giving overly specific educational advice to individuals in the field of skills policy due to the substantial uncertainties that characterise this policy field.

Summary

The new governance arrangements within the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy cover three dimensions of a whole-of-government approach to skills policy. First, the Skills Policy Council mostly tackles the areas of promoting co-ordination, co-operation and collaboration across the whole of government in terms of vertical co-ordination between different levels of government (i.e. counties) and horizontal co-ordination between different ministries and directorates. It also facilitates the engagement of stakeholders throughout the policy cycle by including a range of social partners and NGOs, thereby extending Norway's traditional system of social partnership to new stakeholders. Second, the Future Skills Needs Committee tackles engaging stakeholders throughout the policy cycle and building integrated information systems, as stakeholders themselves are involved in building integrated information systems via the committee. Thereby, the committee creates a common data basis and problem definition in the field of skills policy, which facilitates the work of other governance bodies like the Skills Policy Council.

Policy recommendations

The benefits and challenges of Norway's new governance arrangements identified in the previous section allow for the formulation of a number of policy recommendations, which are the focus of this section.

Give new governance arrangements enough time

In general, decision makers need to be patient when evaluating the impact of the Skills Policy Council or the Future Skills Needs Committee. The broad challenges tackled by the council are unlikely to disappear

soon. As some interviewees in Norway argued, similar councils were temporarily established in the past; however, only a permanent council with an established mandate and mode of operation has the potential to fundamentally improve the quality of policies implemented by engaging all relevant stakeholders throughout the policy cycle. Building up a council from scratch only in times of immediate urgency is unlikely to lead to success. Furthermore, the internal governance of councils and similar advisory bodies is likely to improve when interactions are based on mutual trust, which takes time to build. Defining a clear mandate and mode of operation takes time, and is nearly impossible within a short time span. The inclusion of non-traditional stakeholders might also improve over time as informal networks grow between the stakeholders involved within the council. However, this should also be actively facilitated through the council's mode of operation, as discussed further below.

Improve format of meetings and agenda-setting process within the Skills Policy Council

The current format of Skills Policy Council meetings provides insufficient opportunities for discussion and, as a result, does not deepen co-ordination between stakeholders as much as it could. This especially applies to stakeholders who are not part of the traditional system of social partnership in Norway, and therefore lack means of influence outside the format of the council. All interviewees outside of the ministries agreed that space for discussion has to be created to realise the full potential of the council. Some steps are in discussion or are already being implemented to tackle these issues, including a prolongation of meetings and a split between sessions where high-level political decision makers within government are present, and other sessions reserved for discussion between council members. Additional working groups and administrative meetings between official council meetings will also be implemented, and the agenda of meetings will be shortened to free up time for discussion.

These measures could be steps in the right direction; however, additional steps should be taken. For example, the last agenda item of every meeting should give every council member a formal opportunity to influence the agenda of the next council meeting, which is often largely determined by the Ministry of Education and Research, as well as traditional social partners via more informal channels. Improving the format of meetings and giving opportunities to influence the agenda is particularly important to increase the co-operation and co-ordination of “non-traditional” stakeholders outside of tripartite bodies, as they are more dependent on a well-functioning council to interact with other stakeholders.

Improve communication and demonstrate to Skills Policy Council members the impact of their advice

Council members could try to reach common, jointly formulated conclusions and recommendations on certain agenda items/proposed policies. This would also create an opportunity for social partners to reach a compromise between themselves, which is considered impossible within the current format of the meetings, as explained in detail in the previous section. Joint conclusions and recommendations might also help to create a clear added value regarding existing tripartite bodies. Many interviewed council members also noted that they could not see how their recommendations are used, which could be resolved by the obligatory response and feedback of the addressed stakeholder (either ministries or social partners) to recommendations. Such a response would ideally be put into writing to ensure a certain degree of accountability and commitment of the government in relation to stakeholders, and vice versa. Another, more far reaching possibility would be a written agreement between the government/ministry and stakeholders, similar to a coalition agreement, as visible in the case study on the Alliance for Initial and Further Training in Germany (Chapter 3). Furthermore, a written agreement could also be an important step towards jointly making binding decisions within the framework of the council in the future, something seen as potentially beneficial by many interviewed stakeholders. For example, such decisions could be made concerning policies that directly emerged out of the Skills Policy Council.

Clearly define the mandate and reporting line of the Skills Policy Council in relation to other tripartite bodies

As outlined in the last section, the Skills Policy Council struggles to find its role in relation to other, older tripartite bodies in the Norwegian system of corporatism, with the responsibilities of the different bodies not clear to council members. There also seems to be a tension between “new” stakeholders and traditional social partners concerning the mandate of the council. Members not involved in other tripartite bodies particularly emphasise the importance of tackling lower level “on-the-ground” questions, while traditional social partners want the council to stay at a higher level and approach the topic of skills policy in a more holistic manner.

This tension is problematic, as many lower level questions are already tackled by other tripartite bodies in Norway, in particular the National Council for VET. These other bodies only tackle a specific subfield within skills policy, therefore it makes sense to have a more overarching council that co-ordinates between the different subfields (VET, higher education, lifelong learning, etc.) at a higher level. However, clear guidelines should be established concerning which topics can be discussed by the Skills Policy Council at a system level (with lower level questions being addressed in other tripartite bodies, for example the National Council for VET) and which topics can be discussed at a lower level (i.e. where no other lower level tripartite bodies exist). The dense landscape of tripartite bodies might prove to be a benefit for the council in alleviating its workload, therefore making it possible for it to focus on the broader challenges of Norway’s skills system.

Some more recent changes to Norway’s governance arrangements, such as the planned establishment of regional skills policy councils and regional skills strategies, might partially solve these problems. As one interview partner argued, the “real” practical work happens at the local level. Regional councils could partly tackle such lower level issues. However, the choice of which responsibilities should be delegated to regions in relation to central government is political, and not everything can be decentralised without giving up the uniformity of the educational system. Furthermore, older tripartite bodies often have regional counterparts, for example county vocational training boards that advise county authorities on VET-related matters. Therefore, the mandate of the council (regional and national) has to be clearly defined in relation to other tripartite bodies.

Other suggestions that came up in the interviews should be met with caution. Some interviewees argued that the council could be combined with other tripartite bodies, for example the Council on Labour Market Issues, as there are apparently many intersections between these bodies. However, there is a real danger that such a merged council will become too large, and the issue of skills would become one topic among many. Only a dedicated council can ensure that skills remain at the top of the agenda of all stakeholders. In addition, the inclusion of non-traditional stakeholders such as learning providers only makes sense in a council that is specifically dedicated to skills policy.

Further improve horizontal and vertical co-operation between governance bodies

Some interviewees argued that there are still horizontal co-operation problems between the different ministries. These seem to be highly connected to financing, although this issue is not an explicit part of this case study. In order to facilitate the creation of new policies and ensure the active participation of all ministries, the Ministry of Finance and the government should be open to the idea of a joint budget for measures connected to the Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy and the Skills Policy Council. However, as one interviewee argued, implementing new policies is not as hard as adapting older policies to new common goals. It could therefore also be an option to shift certain older policies from the individual budgets of single ministries to new joint budgets.

Subnational representation in the council should be monitored and expanded as needed, in the context of Norway’s ongoing territorial reforms. As argued before, county-level policy makers are only to a limited

extent involved in skills policy, therefore the county representative mostly tries to raise their awareness of the issue. However, the structure with only one representative for a range of counties with possibly different interests could lead to problems regarding the upcoming restructuring and reform of Norway's administrative divisions (counties). As more and more tasks are delegated to regional governments, conflicts of interest between the regions may become increasingly predominant, and a joint representative for all counties may then no longer suffice to represent their interests in a body such as the Skills Policy Council. This possible source of conflict should be monitored considering its potentially negative effects on the power dynamics within the council, even if there is currently no evidence to suggest such a scenario. Similar problems may also be more predominant in other countries where subnational units have more autonomy in skills policy. Conflict might also arise vertically concerning the co-ordination and division of responsibilities, budgets and tasks that could be delegated from ministries to regions. In this respect again, relying on only one county representative within the Skills Policy Council could be problematic.

Use full potential of social partners' expertise in the Future Skills Needs Committee

Social partners within the committee expressed concern that their expertise in the world of work is not fully valued by all committee members. There are organisational and more fundamental reasons for this. First, similar to the Skills Policy Council, social partner members of the committee were dissatisfied with the format of meetings as it does not fully enable the committee to make use of the social partners' expertise, and interviewees preferred more time and resources for discussions. Furthermore, interviewees were dissatisfied with their low degree of influence on the agenda of the committee, which they perceived as being mainly steered by the secretariat.

However, as many interview partners mentioned, steps in the right direction have already been taken or will soon be implemented, for example more meetings in plenum, multi-day seminars and workshops. Interviewees also highlighted that they expect to have more influence on the agenda within the several subcommittees and working groups (for example on the health sector) that will begin soon within the committee. Such specialisation could de facto lead to more decentralised decisions in the new subcommittees and working groups, and detach agenda-setting in these bodies from the secretariat. Nonetheless, the committee's mode of operation in its "main assembly" should also be "de jure" reformed so that committee members, not just the secretariat, jointly decide on an agenda.

Second, making full use of social partners' potential might also be complicated by the relatively strong concentration of one academic discipline, economics, within the committee, with most researchers on the committee economists. Economics as a discipline has a strong focus on quantitative evidence, whereas social partners can be a rich source of qualitative evidence. It might therefore be beneficial to increase the diversity of academic disciplines within the committee and include those that place a greater focus on processing qualitative evidence, including sociologists or political scientists. Such an interdisciplinary approach might substantially increase the benefits of having social partners within the committee. Furthermore, insights of social partners could inform the choice of future research areas and projects funded by the committee as they can point towards important issues not yet reflected in quantitative evidence, thereby highlighting where future research might prove especially beneficial.

Refine the mandate of the Future Skills Needs Committee concerning targeting individuals

The Future Skills Needs Committee has so far focused on facilitating national and regional planning and employers' decision-making processes, but its role in assessing Norway's future skills needs for individuals is not yet fully developed. A brainstorming process is underway within the committee on how to best distribute committee findings to the wider public, thereby focusing on supporting individuals in their educational choices. Proposals include podcasts or smaller leaflets that summarise the committee's reports in an understandable manner. The secretariat has written two web articles directed at individuals,

and the manuscripts have been circulated among members of the committee for comments and input. In addition, a survey assessing information sources, opinion formation and the educational choices of upper secondary students is currently being commissioned.

However, it also has to be considered to what extent individuals should actually be a direct target group of the Future Skills Needs Committee, or if the mandate should be limited to the target groups of (political or firm-level) decision makers, and thereby on facilitating national and regional planning and employer support. The target group of individuals is also problematic concerning the committee's mandate, as understood by many members, that specific recommendations are not allowed. As mentioned, many interviewees acknowledged that they are sceptical of targeting individuals due to the very general (and system-level) nature of the reports, as well as the possible disadvantages of giving overly specific educational advice to individuals due to the substantial uncertainties that shape this policy field. Furthermore, a variety of websites already seem to exist that specifically target individuals concerning their educational choices, and it is questionable to what extent the committee could produce added value at the individual level compared to existing offers. However, the existing websites and offers that target individuals could themselves be informed and advised of decisions in the Future Skills Needs Committee, thereby adding the perspective of social partners to existing offers.

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Notes

¹ Basic courses of study are broad general or vocational programmes in the first upper secondary school year (for example in “health”, “construction”, etc.).

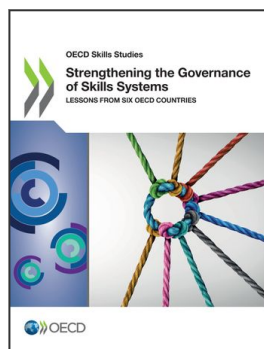
² I.e. those adults who have never attended primary or secondary education before, for example migrants.

³ The Ministry of Justice and Public Security was also involved until 2018, when the department of immigration was transferred to the Ministry of Education and Research as part of an organisational restructuring.

⁴ Meaning the highest hierarchical level of unions and associations, i.e. country-wide organisations that might encompass several sector-level and regional organisations.

⁵ Except the Sami parliament, which has an observer status.

⁶ For example, one could expect that a single representative might not be able to reconcile the diverging interests (due to size, location, economic structure, etc.) between a large number of counties.



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